New Hanover – a tale of two 'cities'

Gavin D Peckham, June 2025

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The old bridge over the Sterk Spruit – with the central part of the village some way ahead and the old hotel and railway station back to the rear. Photo pkfo Google Street View

The new bridge over the Sterk Spruit – looking back along the R33 towards Pietermaritzburg. Photo pkfo Google Street View

Abstract

Situated in the KwaZulu-Natal midlands, about half way between Pietermaritzburg and Greytown, and astride the Sterk Spruit [1], is the village of New Hanover. About 3 kilometres to the east is another settlement, also called New Hanover.[2] In the latter half of the 1800s the names Sterk Spruit and New Hanover were not used the way they are today. This article seeks to clarify the matter and explore the way the names changed over time. This is a matter of very limited local interest – and probably a great ado about very little – but read on if you wish.

Google Earth image showing the original Neu Hannover on the right and the current New Hanover on the left. The housing outside the red block on the left is a relatively recent development.

Personal Motivation

My immigrant ancestors from Kent settled in this district in the 1860s and I grew up there. In my fifties, I developed an interest in our family history and came across documents and references from the late 1800s in which the names Sterk Spruit and New Hanover were sometimes used in such a way, that looking back from the present, it is not clear which settlement or district was being referred to. Also, I wondered why the settlement originally referred to as Sterk Spruit should have changed its name and usurped that of the nearby, and previously established German settlement of New Hanover. I have looked into this matter, as much as to try and clear up my own understanding, as much as for any other reason.

Disclaimer

This article contains several subjective opinions based on incomplete evidence. However, it is the best I can do with the information currently available to me. Suggestions, corrections or any other constructive input is welcomed. Please contact me at: gavin.peckham@gmail.com

[1] This stream was undoubtedly called Sterkspruit by the Dutch settlers who had occupied the area before the influx of English and German settlers in the late 1840s. Thereafter the name was generally anglicised to Sterk Spruit.

[2] *"Neu Hannover"* (double n) was the name given to this settlement by the original German settlers, but was referred to as *"New Hanover"* (one n) by the English speaking settlers in the district.

The "First" New Hanover

The name Neu Hannover[3] was first used by German settlers in 1858 to describe the Lutheran church they erected, its congregation and its surroundings. This name still lingers among the local German community and even appears in a relatively recent map,[4] a section of which is shown on the right.

The origin of the German settlement of Neu Hannover is outlined in the following extract from a book by Walter Volker.[5, 6]

> *"The first three pioneers in this area were the colleagues H. Sieksmeyer, Friedrich Aulfes and Gerhard Bosse, who had settled here in 1857 already. These three gentlemen decided, after consultation with the Hermannsburg missionaries, to gather the German settlers in the area in order to found a new congregation. Their efforts were rewarded, and the Hermannsburg Mission promised them a Pastor, who would have to double-up as a Missionary. On Siecksmeyers suggestion, the new congregation was christened "Neu-Hannover" or New Hanover. In this way New Hannover was thus founded in 1858 by the three farmers H. Siecksmeyer, F. Aulfes and G. Bosse."*

From "*Umvoti County – Jewel of Natal*" [7] we learn that the initial 1858 church of wattle and daub was replaced the following year by a house which served as a church, parson's residence and school. A permanent church was built in 1867, a separate, two roomed school in 1877 and in 1885 a spire was added to the church building. The adjacent photo is from the same source.

Church built in time for Christmas, 1867.
This photograph taken in 1905.

Right: The Lutheran Church at Neu Hannover

In response to a query, a friend of mine, and lifelong resident of the district, informed me that,[8]

> *"The original little Neu Hannover settlement consisted of the church, graveyard, school, hostel, pastor's house and one or two houses for school teachers. The school is still operating, but the hostel is now a care centre for the elderly. I must say that I have also felt a bit uneasy about both the settlement and New Hanover having the same name. I usually say something like: 'New Hannover where the Church is' when I refer to the original Neu Hannover."*

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[3] *"Neu Hannover"* (double n) was the name given to this settlement by the original German settlers, but was referred to as *"New Hanover"* (one n) by the English speaking settlers in the district.

[4] Map ref: KwaZulu-Natal 2930 BC, 4th Ed, 2004. Chief Directorate, Surveys and Mapping, Mowbray, South Africa.

[5] "*The Cotton Germans of Natal*", Walter V. Volker, (2006) ISBN-10 : 0620362987

[6] In response to an enquiry by Liz Finnie, Walter Volker emailed this extract to her on 28 April 2025 and Liz forwarded it to me the following day.

[7] "*Umvoti County – Jewel of Natal*", GADCCA, 1985, page 159.

[8] Email from Roland Wortmann on 9 May 2025.

The tiny German settlement, established in 1858, also lent its anglicised name to the surrounding area as shown in the adjacent map from 1882.[9] This map has no dot representing New Hanover as a settlement per se. Instead the name appears to indicate the general area. This is the earliest map I can find that mentions New Hanover in any way.[10]

The Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository presumably contains official records detailing the establishment of this German community and formalising its name but, if this is the case, then I have been unable to find them.

Right: 1882 – the first map to show New Hanover, but only as a general area, not as a settlement.[9]

Sterk Spruit

In the latter half of the 1800s, the main road from Pietermaritzburg to Greytown was no more than a wagon track. It went via the village of York which was established in 1850, about midway between the two larger towns. Around this time, another track was established further to the east. This track crossed the Sterk Spruit river about 6 km to the east of York.

Now the York settlers were strict Wesleyans and resisted the establishment of any hotel or other public accommodation in their village. Possibly as a result of this, a hotel was built overlooking the spot where the alternative track to Greytown crossed the Sterk Spruit.[11] The hotel was established around 1860 by Robert Garbutt and his wife Mary.[12] The hotel was an ideal overnight or resting spot for travellers between Pietermaritzburg and Greytown and this, along with a nearby outspan[13] site, were probably responsible for the increasing popularity of this route relative to the alternative route via York.

By 1875 the Sterk Spruit route had become more popular than the route via York and had become established as the main road to Greytown. Evidence for this may be found may be found in an 1875 archival document[14] which states,

> *"The Main Road to York, starting from...*[15] *...on to the Umgeni River, crossed by a bridge at 12 miles and Herr Kremer's Hotel. At 14 miles the York Road branches off to the left reaching York - 18 miles - (Sketch herewith)*[16]*. Mr. Loft keeps this road in order from the Town* [PMBurg] *Lands Boundary to the 14 miles Fork, and does as little as possible on the York road, offering all its Force for the Main Cart Line to Greytown."*

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[9] Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, map reference M2-19-3.

[10] Wyld's "*Eastern South Africa*" map (1887) is virtually identical in this regard. https://exhibits.stanford.edu/maps-of-africa/catalog/tp109xh1388

[11] The river was probably first crossed by a ford and later by a bridge. If so, I have been unable to establish when the first bridge was built.

[12] "*My Gran, Edie Cronjé*" Liz Finnie, pg 43 (2025). The hotel still exists to this day. It has had many owners and names and is currently called the Traveller's Rest.

[13] Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, file AGO, Vol I/8/51, Ref 359A/1895

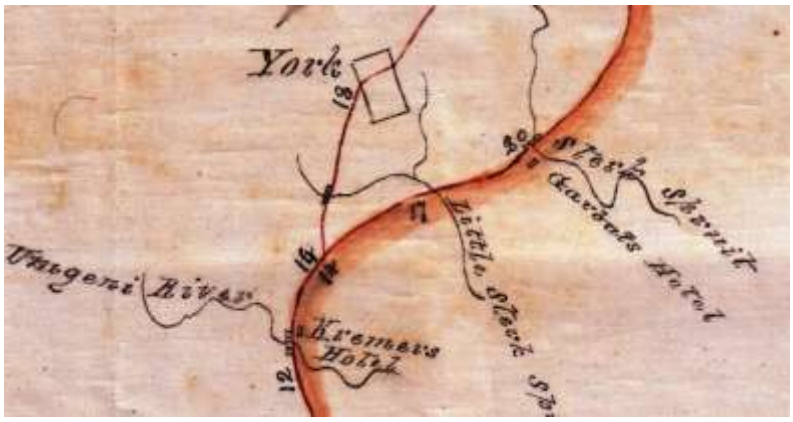
[14] Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, file CSO, Vol 510, Ref 1875/785

[15] At this point there is detailed description of the road from Pietermaritzburg to the Umgeni River.

[16] This map is included in the file referred to in Footnote 14 and a section is copied overleaf.

Thus the outspan site and Garbutt's hotel provided the nucleus for a growing village that was known at that time as Sterk Spruit – after the river on which it was situated.

Sadly I have been unable to find any map that clearly marks the location of Sterk Spruit as a village. On old maps, the name is usually affixed only to the stream.



Detail from the map included in the file referred to in Footnote 14.

However, a NAAIRS[17] search of the Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository turned up several documents indicating that the settlement itself was known by the name Sterk Spruit from the days of Garbutt's hotel (1860) until at least the late 1890s. These documents refer to an outspan site,[18] a rifle association[19] and to the construction of a magistrate's office,[20] a public library[21] and a post office[22] - all of these being located in a settlement specifically referred to as Sterk Spruit.

Furthermore, an 1870's entry in the diary of Betsy Gelder,[23] a store-keeper at York, makes it clear that Sterk Spruit and New Hanover existed as separate locations, and that the name of the German settlement, New Hanover in its anglicised form, did not initially apply to the settlement on the banks of the Sterk Spruit.

> ***Tue 14 Nov 1871.*** *Schroëder of the Mill at Sterk Spruit died yesterday. Old Bossy dead at New Hanover.*

Up until the 1890s the Times of Natal carried a weekly column titled, "Sterk Spruit Notes". As late as 1896 an article[24] in Times of Natal makes it clear that the village on the banks of the Sterk Spruit was still known by that name. This article gives a detailed report about a public meeting held by locals to discuss possible routes for the proposed Pietermaritzburg – Greytown railway line. The relevant extract is:

> *"The second proposal was a line of railway from Pietermaritzburg past Albert Falls, then close along the line of the main road* ***to Sterk Spruit, then on to New Hanover****, Egmonton, Greytown Bridge and Greytown."*

The information outlined above makes it clear that the present day village of New Hanover was undoubtedly first called Sterk Spruit and that the use of this name persisted at least until the late 1890s before being finally replaced by the name usurped from the nearby German settlement.

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[17] National Automated Archival Information Retrieval System.
[18] Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, file AGO, Vol I/8/51, Ref 359A/1895
[19] Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, file CSO, Vol 1477, Ref 1896/5113
[20] Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, file CSO, Vol 1348, Ref 1894/552
[21] Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, file NT, Vol 48, Ref T409/1897
[22] Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, file PMG, Vol 68, Ref GPO236/1898
[23] The diary of Betsy Gelder is housed in the Killie-Campbell Museum, Durban.
[24] *The Times of Natal*, Tuesday, 28 April 1896. Housed in the archives of the Pietermaritzburg Public Library.

The Era of Ambiguity

1. The District of New Hanover. As seen in the map on page 4, until the 1880s the general area was called New Hanover rather than Sterk Spruit. This was probably due to the fact that Neu Hannover was established first and was initially the larger settlement. So even when the settlement on the Sterk Spruit began to flourish, the district still retained the original name of New Hanover. Also, at that stage there was only one New (Neu) Hanover and so the name was unambiguous. However, there were at least three different Sterk Spruit rivers in Natal; one near Camperdown, another near Winterton and the one we are concerned with near York. Thus, using New Hanover rather than Sterk Spruit to describe the district had the added benefit of avoiding any possible ambiguity. However, this is just speculation on my part.

2. The Magistracy of New Hanover.
The official magistracy of New Hanover was established in November 1894.[25] Initially the New Hanover magistrate's offices occupied rented buildings,[26] but, once a permanent magistrate's court was built in Sterk Spruit, it was obviously called the New Hanover Magistrate's Court after the district that it served, and the name of the settlement at Sterk Spruit was then on a one-way ticket to becoming New Hanover.

An extract from the District Record Book kept by the chief Magistrate of New Hanover: "The Magisterial Division of New Hanover was created in October 1894, the Boundaries being defined in Proclamation 43 of 1894. It is composed of a portion of Umvoti and Pietermaritzburg Counties."

The Magistracy was set up on 5 November 1894.

Extract from "Umvoti County – Jewel of Natal" pg 164.

3. Metamorphosis of the Name. There is no doubt that the settlement which started with the establishment of Garbutt's hotel around 1860, was called Sterk Spruit after the local river on whose banks it stood. There is also no doubt that the name Sterk Spruit, referring to this settlement, persisted in official records until at least 1897 – as indicated by a report from the honourable secretary and treasurer of the Sterk Spruit library in that year.[27] It is probable that the establishment of the New Hanover magistrate's court initiated a process by which the name of the village was changed to New Hanover.

After the Pietermaritzburg to Greytown railway branch line reached the village in 1899,[28] the station, like the magistrate's court, was called New Hanover and hence the village itself became known as New Hanover from then on.

Right: New Hanover Railway Station and the Old Road Bridge over the Sterk Spruit, 1903.[29]

[25] "*Umvoti County – Jewel of Natal*", GADCCA, 1985, page 164.
[26] Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, File MJPW, Vol 52, Ref LW1043/1895.
[27] Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, File NT, Vol 50, Ref T1020/1898.
[28] https://sites.google.com/site/soulorailway/soul-of-a-railway/system-6-natal/part-6-pietermaritzburg-greytown
[29] *"Natal: Official Illustrated Railway Guide and General Handbook"* Ed by C.W. Francis Harrison, 1903, pg 208.

The "New" New Hanover

So, when did the village of Sterk Spruit change its name to New Hanover? I suspect that 1898 is a likely candidate. Unfortunately I have not come across any official documentation which formally records the name change from Sterk Spruit to New Hanover. All I can say for sure is that there was a period during which both names were used and that from the mid-1880s the name New Hanover began to steadily replace Sterk Spruit. It was occasionally still called Sterk Spruit up until at least 1897.[30] However, two years later, in 1899 when the new railway branch line to Greytown reached the village, the name New Hanover had taken over completely. Also, from 1898, the Times of Natal stopped referring to Sterk Spruit in favour of the name New Hanover.

It may be noted that after the railway to Greytown was completed, the part of the village on the south bank of the Sterk Spruit was often referred to as New Hanover Rail to distinguish it from the rest of the village on the north bank.

The the village previously called Sterk Spruit, is dated 1898.[31] It shows the branch line to first map I can find which uses the name New Hanover for Greytown as a solid red line up to the Umgeni River and the remainder of the line, which was still under construction, as a dotted red line passing through the 'new' New Hanover. All maps hereafter make use of that new, appropriated name.

Right: A section of the first map to show the location of the 'new' New Hanover.

To Sum Up

1858: A German settlement called Neu Hannover, or New Hanover to the local English settlers, was established and lent its name to not only to the settlement, but also to the surrounding district. That situation persists to the present day.

~1860: A hotel was established on the banks of the Sterk Spruit where the main Pietermaritzburg – Greytown road crosses this stream. This formed the nucleus for a growing settlement initially called Sterk Spruit.

~1880: The name New Hanover began to be used to refer to the settlement at Sterk Spruit . This trend appears to have begun when the magistrate's court for the district of New Hanover was established in the village.

~1900: With the arrival of the railway in 1899, the name New Hanover became entrenched and the earlier name, Sterk Spruit, reverted to being that of the stream alone. And all this whilst the original German settlement of Neu Hannover continued to go about its business just a few kilometres away.

Anyone who can write this much about a topic so trifling, deserves a Noddy Badge !

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[30] See Footnote 21.

[31] "*Map of Natal including the Province of Zululand*" Compiled by J. Masson, Surveyor General, 1898.